# Willingness to Communicate and Previous Communication Experiences of Japanese EFL Learners

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## Abstract

Encouraging learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) is considered an important issue in recent English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan. This study focused on learners' previous communication experiences (i.e., successful and unsuccessful communication experiences) as one of the factors affecting WTC. This study sought to investigate 1) the differences in WTC levels and characteristics of previous communication experiences of learners, and 2) the features of successful and unsuccessful communication experiences of learners. Participants were divided into high-WTC and low-WTC groups according to the WTC scores. Open-ended responses of previous successful and unsuccessful communication experiences were examined through text analysis. Results show that high-WTC students wrote longer texts about their successful communication experiences in detail, whereas low-WTC students wrote about unsuccessful communication experiences with a greater number of words. Moreover, the contrastive features of successful and unsuccessful communication experiences indicated possible implications for differences in WTC levels of students.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the instructional focus of English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Japan has undergone a gradual shift from knowledge-based teaching and learning (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) to more skills-based, communication-oriented teaching and learning (see Munezane, 2015; Yashima et al., 2004). As Japanese EFL classrooms become more and more communicative according to the changes in the Course of Study by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2017), fostering learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English is becoming a fundamental issue. Relatedly, Kang (2005) proposes that, due to increasing emphasis on authentic communication in second language (L2) learning environments, WTC has become one of the key concepts in second/foreign language learning and instruction.

WTC, known as one of the individual difference variables in second language acquisition (SLA) studies, is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). The concept of WTC was originally introduced in first language (L1) communication situations by McCroskey and Baer (1985) and later applied to L2 communication situations by MacIntyre et al. (1998). MacIntyre et al. created a well-known six-layered pyramid model of L2 WTC, which contains eleven factors (i.e., L2 use, desire to communicate with a specific person, state communicative self-confidence, interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation, L2 self-confidence, intergroup attitudes, social situation, communicative competence, intergroup climate, personality). Since then, this unique individual difference variable has been researched by many scholars in the field of SLA studies (e.g., Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Cao, 2011; Fushino, 2010; Kang, 2005; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima et al., 2004). According to Denies et al. (2015), the key aims of L2 instructions should be not only to improve L2 competences, but also to

stimulate their WTC in the target language. In addition, Kang (2005) notes that WTC as a goal of language learning and instruction can lead to outcomes that may not be achieved when communicative competence is the only goal. These statements highlight the importance of WTC among students when learning a target language.

As pointed out by Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014), "Willing and able are two different things" (p. 216). They argue that without the decision to act upon their intention to communicate, learners may still not use the language, despite having the ability and the opportunity to do so. In other words, unless learners are willing to communicate, they will never be able to communicate. This might be the ultimate reason why encouraging learner WTC is essential in learning a second or foreign language.

As MacIntyre et al. (1998) show in their WTC model, L2 WTC can be influenced by multiple learner factors. Therefore, with a view to encouraging EFL learners' WTC, investigating the possible psychological factors that are highly associated with WTC is important. For example, previous research on WTC has dealt with the association with learner behavior (e.g., Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005), self-confidence (e.g., Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Fushino, 2010), international posture (e.g., Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004), and language anxiety (e.g., Alemi et al., 2011; Liu & Jackson, 2008). However, Freiermuth and Ito (2020) make an insightful suggestion on the prospective WTC research:

> What is conspicuously absent from the research as a whole are the experiences language learners have had prior to any analysis of their WTC as well as learners' own personalities, and whereas much research has been tied to the trait-based features of the WTC pyramid, the research has focused on the state of the learners at a particular moment in time rather than seeking the source for students' WTC. (p.4)

They explain the possibilities of learners' past experiences influencing their

present behaviors and attitudes in relation to their WTC. Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) mention that focusing on past communication experiences of learners can be effective in encouraging learner WTC. What seems necessary for the comprehensive understanding of learner WTC is to focus on prior experiences or events that are tied to the present state of learners. Consequently, this study attempts to explore the relationships between Japanese EFL learners' WTC and their past communication experiences–that is, successful and unsuccessful communication in English.

## 2. Literature Review

Drawing on an extensive range of sources, some researchers maintain the importance of EFL learners' previous experiences as an influence on learners' present attitude, motivation, or WTC. MacIntyre et al. (1998) claim that prior language learning leads to the development of self-confidence, which is based on a lack of anxiety combined with a sufficient level of communicative competence. It is considered that these results originally arise from a series of pleasant L2 experiences. In addition, Lowie et al. (2017) point out that "individual differences between learners are statistically associated with the success in second language learning" (p.128). Moreover, according to Kálmán and Eugenio (2015), learners' past success or failure in learning foreign languages may have a significant impact on their attitude and motivation to keep learning. Mahmoodi and Moazam (2014) add to these findings, stating that WTC comes from a level of success in language learning and language training. Success and failure in foreign language learning are dependent, to a large extent, on the cultural backgrounds and educational traditions in which learners were embedded, which is known from many of the previous studies. Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) explain that "focusing on past experiences can be used to heighten learners' perceptions of language competence, even if a

previously encountered target language situation did not go well… unsuccessful moments can serve as motivation to excel in the future, and hence become an opportunity to learn" (p. 219).

Alam et al. (2022) empirically investigated the relationship between WTC and the previous experiences of learners. Through a qualitative case study in a Bangladeshi EFL context, 10 university EFL learners were interviewed and asked about their earlier experiences of learning English and their present WTC. Of the 10 students, six stated that their previous learning experiences had helped accelerate their current WTC, whereas four showed a negative attitude towards the grammar-based learning style of English. Their study highlighted the importance of choosing the appropriate teaching/learning approaches to meet the needs of learners, since this may positively or negatively impact learners' WTC.

Freiermuth and Ito (2020) also examined the effect of previous experiences on learner WTC from a different perspective. They compared the discourse data of students with low and high WTC to see if their past experiences and their personalities either contribute to or inhibit their WTC. They conducted one-on-one interviews with eight Japanese undergraduate students and found that positive past experiences with language teachers and foreign peers may contribute to enhancing learners' WTC.

Preceding studies have shown how prior language experiences relate to learner WTC. However, these studies have only dealt with learners' previous experiences as a rather broad meaning, and little is known about the distinction between learners' successful and unsuccessful communication experiences that may relate to WTC. Moreover, by collecting detailed responses to open-ended questionnaires from a wide range of participants, it is expected that a more generalized result could be obtained compared to a small-scale interview study. This study seeks to clarify the relationships between Japanese EFL learners' WTC and

experiences of successful and unsuccessful communication through text analysis. Accordingly, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the differences in WTC levels and characteristics of previous communication experiences of learners?
2. What are the features of successful and unsuccessful communication experiences of learners?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

Participants of this study were 109 undergraduate students at a university in Hokkaido. Using the WTC scale (Peng & Woodrow, 2010), the participants were divided into a high-WTC group and low-WTC group. The WTC scale consists of 10 questions using a six-point Likert scale. Therefore, the total WTC scores range from a maximum of 60 to a minimum of 10. The cut-off point of high-WTC and low-WTC students was the median score, which was 33.5 (i.e., maximum score of 57, minimum score of 10). Accordingly, participants were grouped into 58 high-WTC and 51 low-WTC students.

### 3.2 Data Collection

Following completion of the questionnaire, open-ended questionnaires asking about their previous successful and unsuccessful communication experiences were compared between the two groups. All the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, and those who agreed to respond to this questionnaire survey participated in this study. The whole survey was carried out during the academic year of 2019.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The open-ended questionnaire data was analyzed through text analysis using KH Coder 3 (Higuchi, 2017). KH Coder 3 enables researchers to automatically classify the texts, calculate the appearance

frequencies, and analyze the relationships between each of the words. This software was chosen because these procedures can all be done automatically and precisely by minimizing arbitrary bias.

This study adopted one of the basic analysis functions of KH Coder, called *co-occurrence network*, and applied two different types of network diagrams: *words-variables network* and *words-words network*. The former was used to compare the previous communication experiences of high-WTC and low-WTC students, and the latter to examine the features of successful and unsuccessful communication experiences of students.

A thicker solid line shows a stronger degree of co-occurrence, and the dotted lines show weaker but clear degrees of co-occurrence. The size of the circle represents the frequency of the extracted key words (see Figures 1–3). To calculate the strength of word associations in the co-occurrence network, the Jaccard Similarity Measure was adopted. In conducting the analysis, the minimum number of occurrences of the extracted words was set to three, and the network was configured to draw the top 45 co-occurrence relationships (edges) in the diagram. All the analysis was done in Japanese, and the results were translated into English by the author.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Summary of the text data

Table 1 shows the summary of the text data used for analysis. Successful and unsuccessful communication experiences of the two groups of students (high-WTC and low-WTC) were examined through text analysis. By following the procedures of text-mining, KH Coder 3 extracted the total number of words (i.e., tokens) and the number of different words (i.e., types).

Texts of high-WTC students contained 729 tokens in 207 types for successful communication experiences and 859 tokens in 204 types for unsuccessful communication experiences. The tokens of high-WTC

students did not show a large difference between successful and unsuccessful communication experiences, indicating that the amount of texts these students wrote concerning their previous experiences of successful and unsuccessful communication did not differ much. On the other hand, low-WTC students' texts included 496 tokens in 179 types for successful communication experiences and 943 tokens in 244 types for unsuccessful communication experiences.

**Table 1**

*Text Data of Students' Previous Communication Experiences*

| | High-WTC Students | | Low-WTC Students | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Tokens | (Types) | Tokens | (Types) | Tokens | (Types) |
| Successful Communication Experiences | 729 | (207) | 496 | (179) | 1225 | (308) |
| Unsuccessful Communication Experiences | 859 | (204) | 943 | (244) | 1802 | (343) |
| Total | 1588 | (332) | 1439 | (340) | 3027 | (519) |

*Note.* Table shows the text data of all participants ($n$=58 for high-WTC students, $n$=51 for low-WTC students).

From these data, it seems that high-WTC students described their successful communication experiences in detail compared to low-WTC students. Conversely, the volume of text related to unsuccessful communication experiences of low-WTC students largely exceeded the volume of text related to successful communication, showing the tendency of low-WTC students being more concerned about their negative past experiences than positive ones. Moreover, compared to high-WTC students, low-WTC students had more tokens in unsuccessful communication

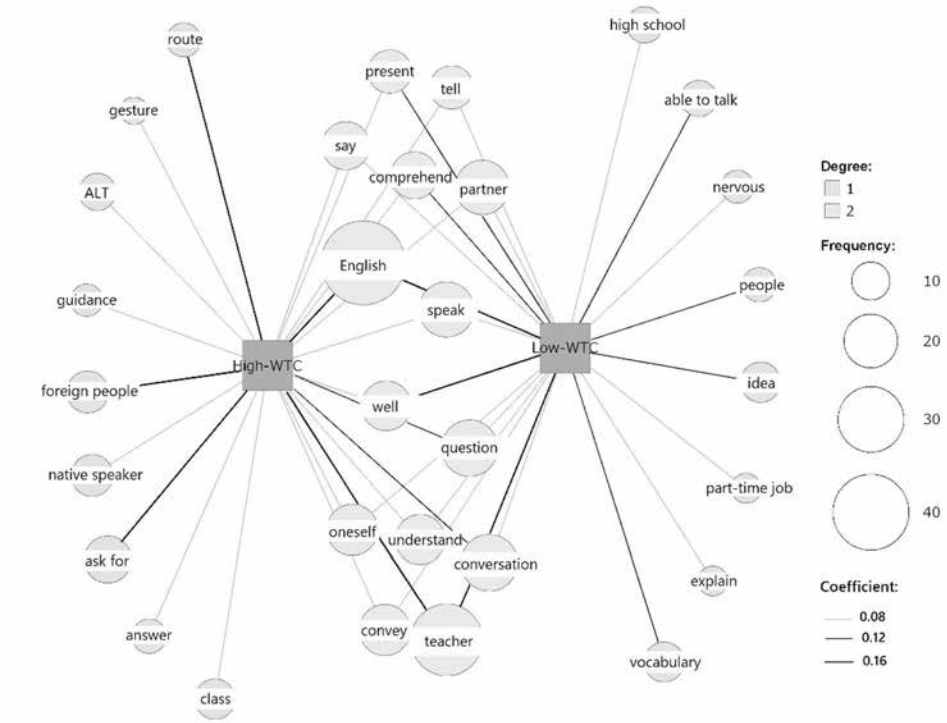
experiences, even though there were fewer low-WTC students ($n$=51) than high-WTC students ($n$=58). In sum, there was an overall tendency in both groups of students of a greater volume of text on unsuccessful communication experiences than on successful communication experiences, and this tendency was especially noticeable in low-WTC students.

4.2 Differences of WTC levels and previous communication experiences

Figure 1 illustrates the words-variables network diagram of high-WTC and low-WTC students' responses on previous communication experiences. In the figure, the common terms (used in both groups of students) are placed in the center, with different terms in each of the groups placed in both sides.

**Figure 1**

*Words-Variables Network of Texts According to Students' WTC Levels*



High-WTC students had written many episodes of communicating with *foreign people* or *native speakers* of English in their previous communication experiences. Especially, the key terms *route*, *foreign people*, and *ask for* are connected with the variable of *High-WTC* by thick solid lines. These terms appear in student comments such as: "when I was *asked for* the *route* to the subway station, I could *answer* correctly" or "I could show the *route* to a *foreigner* in *English*." Students with high-WTC tended to describe their communication experiences with foreign people outside the classroom rather positively, since such comments were mostly observed in their successful communication experiences.

The terms *English*, *question*, *conversation*, and *teacher* are also connected with thicker lines, as seen in high-WTC students' successful experiences of "I could have a simple *conversation* with my *teacher* in *English*" or "I could *ask* a *question* correctly, and could receive an *answer* from the *ALT (Assistant Language Teacher)*." However, these terms also appear in students' unsuccessful communication experiences, as in "when I was *asked* something in *English* from the *ALT*, I could not *understand* well" or "I could not make *myself understood* in *English*, so I had to use Japanese instead." High-WTC students had gone through many trials and errors when learning English communication in class, which could be a very important step for improving their speaking skills.

The total number of words on unsuccessful communication experiences written by low-WTC students (943 tokens) was almost twice the total number of words on their successful communication experiences (496 tokens) as explained in Chapter 4.1 (see Table 1). These results indicate that low-WTC students tended to have concern about their unsuccessful communication experiences. Some examples of the terms used by low-WTC students that are connected with thick lines are: *able to talk*, *people*, *idea*, and *vocabulary*, as in "I wasn't *able to talk* to *people* from

other countries in *English* because I became *nervous*" or "when there is one single *vocabulary* that I don't know, I always have no *idea* what I should *say*." Many of the low-WTC students also mentioned their unsuccessful communication experiences in classroom situations, such as "I cannot *present well* in *English* no matter how hard I prepare for it" or "when the teacher *speaks English* too fast, I can't *comprehend* the course material at all." Peng (2012) found that linguistic factors such as difficulties in comprehension and lack of vocabulary highly restrain learner WTC. The negative experiences in the English classroom, which were observed in the student comments in this study, might have lowered their desire to communicate in English.

**Table 2**

*List of Distinctive Words According to Students' WTC Levels*

| High-WTC Students | | Low-WTC Students | |
|---|---|---|---|
| teacher | .171 | English | .195 |
| question | .140 | well | .116 |
| ask | .108 | conversation | .099 |
| conversation | .102 | understand | .095 |
| convey | .087 | partner | .091 |
| foreign people | .081 | speak | .082 |
| oneself | .078 | vocabulary | .075 |
| understand | .078 | convey | .074 |
| native speaker | .071 | present | .074 |
| say | .070 | others | .067 |

*Note.* Numeric data are based on Jaccard Similarity Measure.

The list of distinctive words used in the texts of high-WTC and low-WTC students is shown in Table 2. This table explains the terms that are distinctive in each of the groups, and partially corresponds with the results of Figure 1, which illustrates the strength of the co-occurrence between

words-variables network. There are some words that appear in both groups (e.g., *conversation*, *convey*, *understand*), but many of them differ to a certain extent. The top-three words of the high-WTC students, *teacher*, *question*, and *ask*, were likely to be used regarding their previous experiences of asking questions to the teacher or ALTs inside the English classroom. These terms were used in both successful and unsuccessful communication experiences of high-WTC students. The top-three words distinctive to low-WTC students were *English*, *well*, and *conversation*. Among these, *well* was one of the key terms for low-WTC students, used in expressions such as "not able to speak *well*", or "could not understand *well*". Such expressions symbolized the low-WTC students' dissatisfaction of their own English proficiency or English communication skills.

4.3 Features of students' successful communication experiences

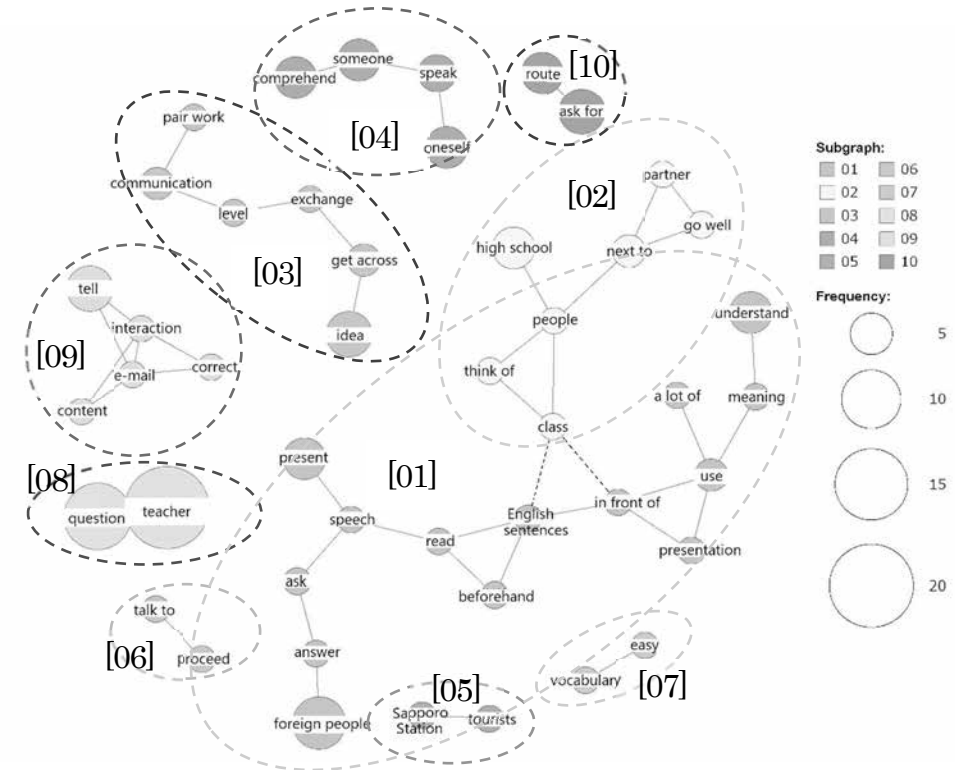
The next section of the coded results is concerned with the overall features of successful communication experiences among students (all of the students in this study). Figure 2 shows the words-words network diagram for students' experiences of previous successful communication. In the figure, 10 subgraphs accounting for students' successful communication experiences were created: 01) effective use of English, 02) positive experiences in class, 03) communication at an appropriate level, 04) comprehension in English, 05) encounter with foreign tourists, 06) proceeding with a conversation, 07) use of simple vocabulary, 08) asking a teacher, 09) successful interactions, and 10) giving directions.

Subgraph 01, including a total of 14 different terms, is the largest group of terms that co-occur. This subgraph includes students' experiences of having been able to use English effectively – for example, in situations of giving presentations or at scenes of communicating with foreign people. As for presentations in class, text included sentences like "when I had prepared the *English sentences beforehand*, I could give a *presentation* well *in front of* the class" or "I was able to *present* my *speech* while *reading*

my own script." That is, students could give successful presentations if they were well prepared. Another theme in this subgraph is related to communication in English; for example, students mention, "when I met some *foreign people* in town, I could *answer* correctly in English", and "I was happy when I could *understand* the *meaning* of spoken English." Such experiences of successful communication in English may serve as a shortcut to increasing students' WTC. This subgraph was accordingly named: effective use of English.

**Figure 2**

*Words-words Network of Texts for Successful Communication Experiences*




Subgraph 02 is connected to subgraph 01 with dotted lines, indicating weak correlations. This subgraph contains seven different terms related to students' classroom experiences. For example, they mention "I could *go*

*well* with my *partner* sitting *next to* me having English conversations" or "I tried using expressions that I could *think of* when doing speaking activities in *class*." These comments represent students' positive experiences inside the English classroom. In relation to this, Alam et al. (2022) mentions that if there is a good atmosphere to practice English in their previous classes, their shyness would be alleviated and their learning would be more enjoyable. Consequently, this subgraph was named as follows: positive experiences in class.

Subgraph 03 contains of the terms *pair work*, *communication*, *level*, *exchange*, *get across*, and *idea*. These keywords are used in student comments such as "I think I am doing well when I am doing *pair work*" or "I can *get across* my *idea* in English when *exchanging* words with someone at the similar English *level*." Students explain about their communication at their right level; thus, this subgraph was named as follows: communication at an appropriate level.

Subgraph 04 includes four keywords: *comprehend*, *someone*, *speak*, and *oneself*. These terms appear in student comments such as "I feel relieved when *someone comprehends* what I have said", or "I felt proud of *myself* when I could *speak* English fluently." These comments show students having been able to comprehend and express themselves well in English. This subgraph was named as follows: comprehension in English.

Subgraph 05 is one of the peculiar groups that contains only two main terms: *Sapporo Station* and *tourists*. This subgraph represents students' positive communication experiences at Sapporo Station, as in "I could respond to the foreign *tourists* at *Sapporo Station*" or "I met *tourists* from foreign countries at *Sapporo Station*, and I was able to talk to them." According to Alam et al. (2022), speaking English with native speakers is a good way to develop students' communication skills. Students in the current study reported good chances of authentic communication by encountering foreign people in town. Therefore, this subgraph was named

as follows: encounter with foreign tourists.

Subgraph 06 is also a small group of terms: *talk to* and *proceed*. This subgraph is symbolized by the student comments such as "during the English conversation class I attended, I always tried to *proceed* with a conversation" and "I could *talk to* my classmates in English so the conversation *proceeded*." Thus, this subgraph was named as follows: proceeding with a conversation.

Subgraph 07 is another small group of keywords: *easy* and *vocabulary*. This subgraph is characterized by the student comments "I could speak English by using *easy vocabulary* words" or "I could go through an *easy* Q & A in English with the only *vocabulary* I knew." Such remarks designate the possibilities of gaining confidence in English communication irrespective of the students' proficiency levels. This subgraph was hence named as follows: use of simple vocabulary.

In subgraph 08, two keywords with high frequency co-occur, which are: *question* and *teacher*. The comments in this subgraph closely resemble one another, as in "I could ask *questions* to the *teacher*" or "I was able to *question* the *teacher* correctly." These refer to the successful experiences of questioning the English teacher appropriately in class. Consequently, this subgraph was named as follows: asking the teacher.

Subgraph 09 includes five terms: *tell*, *interaction*, *e-mail*, *content*, and *correct*. Students explain their successful experiences, such as "I could *tell* the English teacher about my inquiry by *e-mail*" or "I am now able to have *e-mail interactions* using English." Therefore, this subgraph was named as follows: successful interactions.

Subgraph 10 contains only two terms: *route* and *ask for*. This subgraph is a distinctive group illustrating students' successful communication experiences of being asked for directions in English, as in "when I was *asked for* the *route* to the subway station, I could answer correctly" or "I was able to show the *route* to a foreigner when I was *asked*

*for* help." Accordingly, this subgraph was named as follows: giving directions.

Students' comments on their successful communication experiences tended to have variety, demonstrating that there could be various chances for students to feel successful communicating in English in their daily lives, both inside and outside the EFL classrooms. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), positive experiences in the language classroom and in other contexts where there had been opportunities for them to learn or use a language may encourage learners to put more effort into the learning process, which eventually leads to their enjoyment and satisfaction. Moreover, as Freiermuth and Ito (2020) point out in their study, positive past experiences with language teachers or peers highly contribute to the learners' WTC. In this study, many of the student comments of successful communication experiences symbolized their confidence and high motivation regarding English use, which seems to be relevant to their WTC in English.

4.4 Features of students' unsuccessful communication experiences

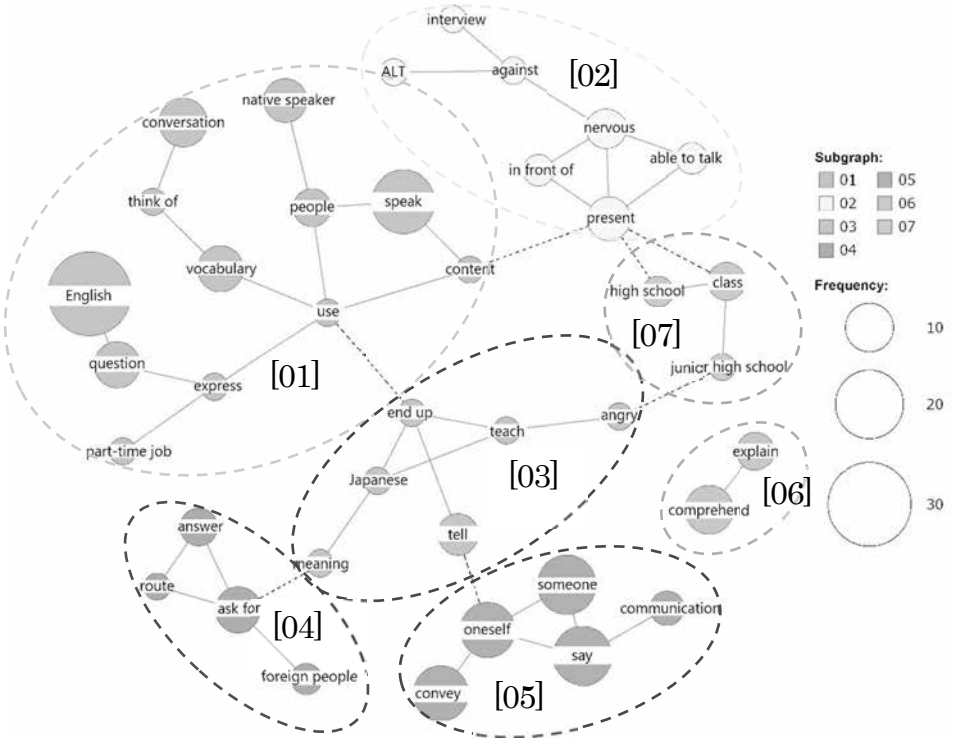
Turning now to the results of students' experiences of unsuccessful communication, Figure 3 illustrates the diagram of the words-words network of the students in total. As can be seen in the diagram, seven subgraphs were formed: 01) difficulties in using English, 02) fear of public speaking, 03) unsuccessful interactions, 04) giving directions, 05) experiences of miscommunication, 06) comprehension in English, and 07) previous classroom experiences.

Subgraph 01 is the largest group of terms that co-occur in the diagram, containing a total of 12 terms. This subgraph demonstrates the students' difficulties in speaking English or having conversations with others, especially with native speakers. Examples of students describing their unsuccessful experiences of communicating with others include "I couldn't *express* my intention to the customers in *English* during my *part-time job*"

or "I couldn't *think of* the appropriate *vocabulary* to *use* when I was trying to *speak* to the *native speaker* of *English*." Such remarks represent the main theme of this subgraph, which is named as follows: difficulties in using English.

**Figure 3**

*Words-words Network of Texts for Unsuccessful Communication Experiences*




Subgraph 02 is the second largest group of terms, including *interview*, *ALT*, *against*, *nervous*, *in front of*, *present*, and *able to talk*. As in the diagram, the important keyword *nervous* is in the center of this subgraph, which is connected to the other different words. Thus, many of the student comments indicate their nervousness when having an interview (e.g., "I feel very *nervous* when I have an *interview* in English"), or when

presenting in front of the class (e.g., "when I have to *present in front of* the large audience, I become so *nervous* that I often forget what I have to say"). Tóth (2017) claims that oral communication in the target language is the most anxiety-provoking activity of all, which could be influenced by the learners' previous experiences of using the target language. Consequently, this subgraph was named as follows: fear of public speaking.

Subgraph 03 is weakly correlated (connected in dotted lines) to each of subgraphs 01, 04, 05, and 07, which means that the terms included in this group have a certain interrelationship with terms in the different groups, as well as the terms inside of subgraph 03 itself. Examples of student comments in this subgraph include "I could not *tell* the right word to my partner, so we *ended up teaching* each other in *Japanese*" and "my English teacher got *angry* at me when I didn't know I had to bring the textbook to class, although he had *told* me to." These student remarks represent the negative experiences of interaction with others. Accordingly, this subgraph was named as follows: unsuccessful interactions.

Subgraph 04 includes four terms of *answer*, *route*, *ask for*, and *foreign people*. This subgraph corresponds with subgraph 10 of the successful communication experiences (see Chapter 4.3, Figure 2) but explained in student remarks in opposite ways. For instance, they mention "when I was *asked for* the *route* to the station, I couldn't *answer* at all" and "when I was *asked for* the *route* from *foreign people*, I didn't know what to do." This subgraph was thus named as follows: giving directions, which represents the unsuccessful communication experiences of students.

Subgraph 05 consists of five main terms, including *convey*, *oneself*, *someone*, *say*, and *communication*. This subgraph explains the communication problems of students, as in "I always don't know what *someone* is *saying* in English, so I cannot *communicate*" and "I always think to *myself* that I can't *convey* my intention in English." Therefore, this subgraph was named as follows: experiences of miscommunication.

Subgraph 06 contains only two terms: *explain* and *comprehend*. This subgraph oppositely corresponds with Subgraph 04 of the successful communication experiences (see Chapter 4.3, Figure 2). Student comments represent negative experiences of comprehending in English, such as, "I was not able to *comprehend* the English *explanation* of my teacher" and "the teacher *explained* about the homework in English, but I could not *comprehend* what she had said and could not submit in time." Accordingly, this subgraph was named as follows: comprehension in English, from the aspect of unsuccessful communication experiences.

Subgraph 07 consists of three terms: *high school*, *class*, and *junior high school*. This subgraph explains students' previous unsuccessful experiences, such as "I did not understand anything in the English *classes* of *high school* or *junior high school*" and "I was not able to speak English at all in *high school classes*." Peng (2012) indicates that the classroom environment is the main contextual factor reported to influence learner WTC in class. These previous classroom experiences of students may well affect the current WTC of students. This subgraph was consequently named as follows: previous classroom experiences.

In the words-words network diagram of unsuccessful communication experiences, all the subgraphs (except for subgraph 06) were connected to each other and shared similar features in student comments. In other words, many students have gone through similar experiences of unsuccessful communication, and have felt similarly in such situations. Learner comments on unsuccessful communication experiences were characterized by their difficulties in communicating with foreign people, nervousness when giving presentations in class, or other negative classroom experiences in the past. According to Gkonou (2017), past language learning experiences, such as past teachers' judgmental attitudes towards students or failure in formal exams in the past, are likely to endanger learners' current self-beliefs. The unsuccessful experiences seem

to a certain extent to have a negative influence on students' present desire to communicate, since low-WTC students tended to have more comments on their negative communication (i.e., greater number of tokens and types) than high-WTC students.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the associations between Japanese EFL learners' WTC and their previous communication experiences. Through text analysis, experiences of successful and unsuccessful communication of high-WTC and low-WTC students were examined in detail.

RQ1 asked, "What are the differences in WTC levels and characteristics of previous communication experiences of learners?" High-WTC students wrote longer comments on successful communication experiences compared to low-WTC students. In contrast, comments related to unsuccessful communication were more common in low-WTC students' responses than high-WTC students'. Furthermore, the words-variables network diagram and list of distinctive words indicated the different tendency between the two groups of students. These findings suggest that high-WTC students are likely to have more experiences of successful communication, and the keywords used represent their confidence and motivation, while low-WTC students had more concern over their unsuccessful communication experiences in the past. That is to say, students' present degree of WTC could be influenced by their previous communication experiences positively and negatively, thus looking back at the past seems efficient to understand students' present WTC.

RQ2 asked, "What are the features of successful and unsuccessful communication experiences of learners?" From the learner comments, successful communication involved positive actions and interactions inside and outside the English classroom. The words-words network diagram

illustrated a variety of positive learner experiences in the past. Especially, when they had real contact with the native speakers of English, many of the students had been motivated to communicate with such people. As for unsuccessful communication, many terms concerned with the experiences of communication difficulties emerged, in addition to comments on their lack of vocabulary, which may lead to low-WTC. Successful communication experiences showed variety in the results of the words-words network diagram, with 10 different subgraphs, mostly independent to each other. Unsuccessful communication experiences were divided into seven subgraphs, but most of them were connected to each other and shared many terms in common. These results indicate that a great variety of experiences may serve as students' feelings of success in learning English. Likewise, many students had gone through similar negative communication situations that led to their unsuccessful experiences, which may have caused their low-WTC. Taken together, comparisons of students' previous successful and unsuccessful communication experiences give us important implications to reflect on WTC of students.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has been one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine the individual features of successful and unsuccessful experiences independently, along with the students' WTC levels in relation to each. There was a different tendency in previous communication experiences between high-WTC and low-WTC students.

The most important limitation of this study lies in the fact that the survey was carried out only once, and in the form of written texts. For the future research, adding a follow-up questionnaire to delve into the participants' intentions of the responses or carrying out an interview with a certain proportion of participants might be effective for achieving a deeper understanding of the findings in the present study.

As Peng (2012) states, learner WTC in their EFL classrooms can be influenced by a range of individual and environmental factors. Understanding the learners' individuality and their prior experiences may help improve their present attitudes towards the EFL classroom. For the future EFL classes in the Japanese context, increasing learner WTC and encouraging active participation in class is essential. As Barkley and Major (2020) note, teachers should provide students the opportunity to connect their prior learning experiences with the new learning to enhance the meaning of the latter. For teachers, capturing the personal backgrounds of students, or in other words, looking into the previous experiences of students, will help build up the present as well as the future WTC of learners.

Note

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